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AUTHOR Allen, D. I.
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ABSTRACT

The new social studies rationale assumes that concepts learned in a formal school setting can be incorporated into the student's cognitive structure and, further, that students can apply fundamental social studies concepts to analysis of the world's major problems. Teaching, then, concerns itself not with accumulation of factual information but, rather, with the development of concepts, theories, generalizations, principles, and main ideas which, according to this study, need to become part of the student's way of viewing the world in order to interpret and analyze the data of everyday experience. Thirty-five select social studies student teachers and eighteen English student teachers, asked to discuss and suggest remedies for one of four major social issues, were randomly divided into two groups -- one cued to use theories and concepts from their social science field, and the other not cued. Demonstrating the apparent lack of emphasis on concept and theory learning, comparisons between majors and between the cued and uncued teachers indicated that study in their major field did not appear to have improved their ability to analyze and suggest remedies for major social issues. School instruction in general and the social studies specifically need to concern themselves with functional learning. (SJM)

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# THE ANALYSIS OF SOCIAL ISSUES BY SOCIAL SCIENCE MAJORS

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D. I. Allen
Simon Fraser University
Burnaby, Canada

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Most of us who teach cherish the fond hope that our efforts will somehow make a difference to the students with whom we work. Fortunately for the preservation of our self-image we are almost always spared knowledge of our degree of success.

The conventional wisdom of the not-so-new social studies has it that our teaching should be less concerned with the accumulation of information than with the development of concepts and theories and ways of thinking. The perceptionswe have of our environment are selective and are screened through the network of our cognitive structure. The environment can take on meaning only as it is translated symbolically and related to cognitive structure. Presumably the ability to derive meaning will be enhanced if a person's cognitive structure incorporates clusters of concepts that are adequate for a full understanding of the events concerned. Almost all recent literature in the social studies field and the rationale behind the vast quantity of new curriculum materials reflects the point of view that concepts learned in a formal school setting can be incorporated into the students' cognitive structure. This assumption is fundamental. On it rests the validity of much of the recent social studies movement. Unless the concepts, the generalizations, the main ideas, the principles and the theories on which we focus become part of the students' perceptual screen they will not be used in interpreting and analyzing the data of his everyday experience. This, of course, is a truism, but it may help to indicate that students need far more help than the superficial exposure that they often receive if learning is to be effective.

A recent incident at Simon Fraser University may serve to highlight some of the dimensions of the problem. The findings are not new, but they were rather startling to those of us who were involved.

We at Simon Fraser generally consider ourselves fortunate in the quality of the students who enter our teacher education program. All

are academically able. They have to be to survive a very stringent screening process which excludes more than half the qualified applicants. As a group they are very much aware of the major social issues and problems of the world, and the supporting departments in the social sciences are staffed on the whole by enthusiastic and capable faculty.

Fifty-three of these student teachers in a social studies curriculum seminar were asked to discuss and suggest remedies for one of four major social issues: pollution, hunger, war and the financing of education in British Columbia. The subjects were randomly divided into two groups. Those in one group were cued to make use of theories and concepts from their social science field. Those in the second group were not. The students' written statements were rated by three social science educators on a six point scale according to their degree of reliance on social science concepts and theories. A rating of one being given for a response which was completely atheoretical and simplistic and one of six for a response which involved a sound theoretical analysis and consistent set of suggested remedies. A student who in analyzing the problem made some reference to a concept or theory which could be identified with one of the social sciences, and who suggested a remedy which was not inconsistent with his analysis would have been given a rating of 3. The group of fifty-three included eighteen who were majoring in English rather than the social sciences so that it was possible to make comparisons between social science and English majors as well as between groups of students who were and were not cued to make use of social scientific insights.

The results for the whole group were appallingly bad. The majority of students responded in very general terms which had little to do with insights one might reasonably expect them to have received from their major field. Even those who were cued to use concepts and theories from their major field were unable to do so, in fact the results from them were slightly worse than the results for the other group.

Table 1: Mean Scores of Students Who Were and Who Were Not Cued to Using Social Science Concepts

| Students Who Were Cued (N = 28) | Students Who Were Not Cued (N = 25) |
|---|---|
| 3·26 | 2·72 |

P> ·05

The most disturbing result, however, was the comparison of social science majors with English majors. The mean score for the English students was slightly higher than that for those majoring in the social sciences.

Table 2: Mean Scores of Social Science and English Majors

| Social Science Majors (N = 33) | English Majors (N = 18) |
|---|---|
| 3·03 | 3·04 |

P> ·05

The students' study in their major field did not appear to have improved their ability to analyze and suggest remedies for major social issues. In fact a number of students said precisely that on their papers. The following statement by Louise, a History major, was typical.

> "Majors at college - e.g., History - do not include study of present world or domestic problems. However, with a layman's understanding....."

It seems that the students in this sample at least have received little value from fourteen to sixteen years of exposure to social studies and the social sciences during a period when there has supposedly been a major reform in the teaching of these subjects. It may not be too strong to suggest that the

last few years of concentrated study have made no difference at all. Certainly the choice of a social science major rather than one in English had not affected their thinking.

Some examples of comments made by the students may be of interest. Can you identify the majors?

1. John Topic: War

I must take a unilateralist's approach to the cessation of war. That is, before war can be terminated one side must give in. The same holds true when peace is to be sustained. One major power must abolish armaments and show some trust in its "enemy."

The key word to this idea is "trust" and the necessity of this word and its variable implications indicates the exact problem.

Such an idea of disarmament means nothing without the development of trust and respect.

Man has not always had the bomb (it simply has proven more efficient than bare hands and clubs. Disarm your minds!

2. Susan Topic: The Financing of Education in British Columbia

I believe education in this province is neglected as far as provisions for sufficient funds are concerned. Education is the major and most important aspect of this province yet it is not treated so. Something like $1,000,000,000 a day is supposedly spent on education in B. C. - so said D. Brothers - yet such things as salaries for Education Ministers and School Board representatives probably consume a major portion of this money while teachers and facilities for children are poor and must suffer. Comparisons for the amount of money spent are usually made with either other provisions or other years in B. C. They are not compared with other areas, such as B. C. Hydro, construction of highways or dams, although they should be.

Control of Education should not be in the hands it is in, nor under the government it is under. Education should take priority over most everything because of its importance. By-laws should not determine what should be spent on Education because most people are against spending "their" tax money on anything.

3. Louise Topic: Hunger

Majors at college - e.g., History - do not include study of present world or domestic problems.

However, with a layman's understanding, the problem of hunger in the world could be eased by the cooperation of over-supplied countries, like Canada's wheat and dairy products - which are being stored or dumped into lakes, or burned - to be given to or bought by starving nations for a token price. It is ridiculous to subsidize farmers in North America for not growing crops when the land could be used for crops to supply hungry peoples.

4. Ted Topic: War

Education should be used as a remedy against undesirable aspects of war.

Such things as tolerance, ambition, aggressiveness can be found as a reason for war. If Education cannot provide the means by which a sense of tone or peacefulness can be attained in the lives of students war is inevitable every time. Students become intellectually mature but not emotionally under the present educational system. Basically it is the creativity which exists in our minds which is not allowed to be used in our schools which stagnates and becomes polluted. I suggest the undesirable aspects of war can best be remedied through the use of teaching organically or creatively.

5. Howard Topic: Pollution

The continuing, and indeed the increasing, presence of pollution attest to the failure of the anti-pollution campaign to date.

What is needed is a more rational campaign. Dan Campbell had a point when he indicated the hysteria that is being perpetrated in classrooms.

> An example of what I mean by "rational" is to stop stressing absolutes in the anti-pollution campaign. There can never be "pure" air, or "clean" water. We must strive, not for utopian purity, but for attainable levels of relative freedom from pollution.
>
> We should emphasize, not ignore, the successes that have been achieved. Ultimate success will not be borne of hopelessness.

These, or course, were not the best responses, but it should be remembered that this was a fairly select group. All the students were sufficiently able not only to survive high school and college, but to do sufficiently well to be admitted first to university, and then to the teacher education program. They were sufficiently interested to elect social science majors in their degree programs and to want to teach social studies in school. These were intelligent and capable students, just about ready to enter classrooms to pass on the benefits of their learning, hopefully to teach their own students to apply the fundamental concepts and theories of the social sciences to the analysis of the world's major problems.

John had been trained as a sociologist, yet he was totally unable to apply the insights of his field. Surely a sociologist has something to say about the difficulties of changing people and nations to enable them to trust each other sufficiently to avoid wars. Of course John was not writing as a sociologist (even though it had been suggested to him that he do so). He was writing as a layman, a nice guy who thought wars were bad and could be avoided if only everybody would trust each other. Susan, similarly, was writing as someone who thought Education was important and should get more money, rather than as a historian with sets of concepts and techniques of analysis. Howard's background in political science did not create for his solution of rationality and optimism any difficulties about pressure groups or conflicting goals. Even the possibility of legislation did not occur to him.

In each of these cases, competence and concerned students, trained in the social sciences well beyond their high school years, were unable to apply the concepts and theories to which they had been exposed. Subsequent statements by these five students indicated that they were aware of theoretical insights which could have been powerful in analyzing the problems they elected to discuss. But these potential insights were dormant. They had not become part of their perceptual screen, their way of viewing the world.

The task of changing students' cognitive structure in a way that will effect their functioning in out-of-school contexts has rarely been faced in the curriculum projects of the past decade. School instruction has focussed on the acquisition of knowledge, concepts and theories, rather than on their utilization. The end product has been proof-of-possession in a terminal test rather than evidence of appropriate use. This kind of formal learning should be distinguished from what might be called functional learning. Functional learning results in modifications in a student's perceptual screen and is developed and used as needed through interaction with significant others, largely in informal settings outside the classroom.

To survive, school learning must be useable in the student's "real" world. If we provide a student with a rich repertoire of concepts and principles which are transferrable and useable, but which are never used in his social environment the chances of their being incorporated into cognitive structure are slight. On the other hand we have, hopefully, some worthwhile function to perform.

The approaches worked out in curriculum projects have been a very helpful first step. However, other procedures must be found which stress the applicability of ideas and provide continuing support in out-of-school settings. It may be necessary to search out some of the real problems which face individual students, and discuss, probe and otherwise lead them to helpful social scientific insights. If we are to prepare students for an effective consideration of the pressing social problems of the world such as war, hunger,

pollution, prejudice and apathy, these too must be investigated by the students as their own problems, with the teacher's role as catalyst, facilitator and leader becoming progressively less necessary.